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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

Czechoslovakia: A New Direction

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12 Jan. 68
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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

12 January 1968

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 1-68

SUBJECT: Czechoslovakia: A New Direction*

SUMMARY

The demotion of Czechoslovakia's Party First Secretary, Antonin Novotny, after 14 years in his post, signifies more than a change of personalities. A European Communist state is becoming less Communist and more European, and neither the pace nor the goals of the transition are likely to please Moscow. The forces which succeeded in removing Novotny -- presumably against the desires of the Soviets -- are now beginning to place emphasis not only on

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economic reforms but political reforms as well. The latter will pertain mainly to domestic affairs -- the reduction of arbitrary party authority -- but also, inevitably, to foreign affairs. The new forces in Prague are concerned with internal political pluralism, as are the Yugoslavs, and with national sovereignty, as are the Romanians.

Changes at the Top

1. On 5 January, 46-year old Alexander Dubcek, First Secretary of the semi-autonomous Slovak party organization, replaced 63-year old Antonin Novotny as First Secretary of the entire Czechoslovak Party. Four full members were added to the Party Presidium raising the total in that body to 14 full members and 5 candidates. The Central Committee meeting which effected these changes was the fourth meeting since mid-September 1967. The Presidium itself had been in almost daily session since the beginning of December. Certain Czechoslovak armed forces reservists had apparently been alerted for several days in connection with the crisis, and Soviet Party Chief Brezhnev had invited himself to Prague in early December to see, inter alia, if the Czech political wines were vintage Budapest 1956.

2. The election of Dubcek to lead the entire party seems to be the latest, but not the last, in a series of bids for power by a coalition representing Slovak regional interests and the more generally liberal elements in the party. Dubcek may not have been the leader of the coalition in the Presidium; one of the names which had more frequently been mentioned as likely successor to Novotny was planning chief Oldrich Cernik, a Czech with

reformist views. Nevertheless, Dubcek earned some stature among liberals during his four years in charge of the Slovak party. It was relatively easy for liberal writers who had difficulty with the censors in Prague to have their articles published in Bratislava. Moreover, Dubcek played a particularly active role 25X1

25X1 in the last few months in spearheading demands for change. [redacted] [redacted] Dubcek criticized Novotny before the Central Committee for being "unable to solve problems", noted his age and deteriorating health, and recommended that he give up his main party post and retain the rather ceremonial office of the presidency -- the recommendation finally adopted.

3. Despite some 17 years residence and study in the USSR, mostly as a young man, Dubcek does not strike us as being Moscow's man in Prague. Dubcek's speech at the Czechoslovak Central Committee plenum last September alluded not at all to the experience of the Soviet comrades, and the terminology he used was more reminiscent of Walt Rostow than of Marx or Lenin. Dubcek's above mentioned attack on Novotny preceded, not followed, Brezhnev's trip to Prague. A plausible story now circulating among Czechoslovak party members has it that Dubcek was among

several Presidium members who told Brezhnev to keep out of Czechoslovak internal matters. As a practical politician Dubcek probably realizes that Czechoslovakia's problems and his own prospects are not going to be settled in the USSR but at home. Finally, residence in the USSR is no guarantee of permanent loyalty to the USSR; Imre Nagy spent about 15 years in Moscow.

The Revisionist Drift

4. It seems to us that the comings and goings of various persons, however interesting in themselves, are not what it is really all about in Czechoslovakia. One of the main reasons cited by the Czechoslovak press for the 5 January changes was the need for the "democratization" of Czechoslovakia's political system. This is more than a rhetorical flourish. We are not suggesting that there is no longer any debate in Czechoslovakia concerning "economic reforms" -- i.e. the transition from a command economy to a market economy, improved quality of goods (especially consumers' goods), social welfare, and so forth. But the Novotny regime had officially endorsed most of these "economic reforms", and still Novotny was removed. The important point is that there appears to be a growing consensus among most articulate elements in the country that economic reforms must be accompanied

by basic political reforms as well. These elements argue that the political system must be radically changed -- "liberalized" in the term many Yugoslav observers prefer, "revisionized" may be what Brezhnev muttered to himself on the way home from Prague.

5. Whatever its label, the process has been slowly gathering momentum since the early 1960's, when Novotny belatedly permitted the de-Stalinization demanded from below. Since that time, Novotny has been fighting both the dogmatists and the liberals, but it is the former who have grown weaker, and Novotny has moved by fits and starts towards accommodation with the latter. In 1965 and 1966, writers in the party and cultural press focused on the tension between the individual and the government, the absence of real representative institutions, the lack of public influence on policy, and the abuse of rule by dogmatic politicians. Many of these writers held influential positions, such as Zdenek Mlynar, Secretary of the Legal Commission of the Party Central Committee, and Michal Lakatos, a legal scholar attached to the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. Lakatos, for example, borrowed from Yugoslav theorists the argument that the party should withdraw from the daily management of affairs and relinquish some of its decision-making power to "autonomous" institutions (e.g. workers' councils,

nationality groups, trade unions). But he went beyond the Yugoslavs to urge that a multi-party system be instituted in the Czechoslovak National Assembly, and several other Czech and Slovak writers have publicly echoed Lakatos on this point.

6. During the past two years the liberals have become bolder, and their terms of argument more explicitly political. Among the less obvious conditions facilitating this process have been the excesses of the Chinese cultural revolution, which have caused greater revulsion in Czechoslovakia, both in and out of the party, than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Writers in the Slovak press, for example, have attributed these excesses not just to Mao and company -- as the Soviets usually have done -- but to basic defects in the party as a political institution. They have argued that similar deformations can be barred from Czechoslovakia only through democratization of society and government.

7. Probably the most extreme statement of political dissent was expressed by writer and party member Ludvik Vaculik at the Writers' Congress last June. He praised the "high level of democracy" achieved by the pre-World War II republic under Masaryk,

and contrasted it with Communist rule:

> "It is necessary to understand that no human problem has been solved in our country for 20 years -- starting with the elementary needs, such as housing, schools and prosperity, and ending with the more refined requirements which cannot be satisfied by the undemocratic systems of the world. For instance, the feeling of full value in society. The subordination of political decisions to ethical criteria. The belief in the value of even small-scale labor, the need for confidence among men, the development of the education of the entire people ..."

8. In the good old days, of course, Ludvik Vaculik might have been shot; this time he and his companions merely lost their party membership cards, which apparently they did not value highly anyway. They probably received such gingerly treatment because the party itself was divided, both on the tactics to be used against people like Ludvik Vaculik, and indeed on the merits of their protest.

9. Besides the intellectuals' protest, the restive students have played an indirect role in the Czechoslovak transition. Open manifestations of student unrest are not rare in Eastern Europe, and the overtones are usually political. But only in Czechoslovakia, we suspect, could university students repeatedly stage sit-in demonstrations against the regime as they did last fall,

hear a Party Central Committee member and university official tell them to be patient because an "irreversible democratization" was taking place in their country, and then read the party youth newspaper's condemnation of the "police brutality" of the uniformed men who dispersed them. Moreover, one of Novotny's high cards in dealing with student unrest on previous occasions had been the failure of the students to arouse the sympathy of the workers. This time, however, the trade union newspaper echoed the Party youth newspaper's exoneration of the students, and then added that the episode demonstrated the need for establishing regular channels for expressing dissent and obtaining redress of grievances on all important areas (i.e. workers' interests). At that point Novotny may well have realized he was in serious trouble.

Internal Changes Ahead

10. The expansion of the Party Presidium form 10 to 14 full members was apparently to solidify the liberal majority (including the Slovaks). Further changes in the top echelons of the party and government are in prospect. There are still plenty of anti-liberals around, but for the moment they are on the defensive. Their representatives in the Presidium, such as Jiri Hendrych,

are likely to be demoted. In addition, Premier Lenart, a liberal Slovak, may be replaced in that post by someone such as the previously mentioned Oldrich Cernik, in order to maintain a nationality balance. There could also be significant changes in the Ministry of the Interior, which was publicly attacked by a candidate member of the Presidium last September. The reasons cited for the attack -- inefficient operation of the Ministry's buildings and grounds in Prague -- are so trifling as to suggest the beginnings of a more serious campaign against the Ministry and against its subordinate organization, the secret police (StB). Novotny will apparently retain the ceremonial title of President and his full membership in the Presidium for the time being. As long as he does not work against Dubcek, he is unlikely to become an unperson like his friend Khrushchev, probably because the Czechoslovaks wish to show that they can handle problems of this nature with more dignity than the Soviets.

11. Judging by the extensive and favorable coverage given Czechoslovak developments in the Yugoslav press the Yugoslavs expect the Czechs to become something like themselves. They also expect that the changes in Czechoslovakia will stir similar impulses in other parts of Europe.

12. If there is a similarity between what is happening in Czechoslovakia and Romania, what has happened in Yugoslavia, and what may happen elsewhere, it may be that -- freed from continuous Soviet importunity -- all are reasserting their traditional patterns of political behavior. In the case of Czechoslovakia, these patterns are more Western and democratic than elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and the Czechs may ultimately therefore go further than the Yugoslavs or anyone else in Eastern Europe toward political democracy. Also in Czech fashion, however, they will probably move cautiously lest the transition provoke unpleasant Soviet reprisals.

Czechoslovak-Soviet Relations

13. As the new liberalization in Czechoslovakia emerges more clearly, a new facet of it is revealed: its opposition to Moscow's domination of Prague's foreign policy. The Middle East crisis produced widespread dissatisfaction within all segments of society, partly because of sympathy for Israel -- e.g. the Party member and writer Mnacko who defected to Israel -- and partly because so much of that Czechoslovak foreign aid extended on behalf of Moscow's interests seemed to have gone to waste, and yet Moscow expected Prague to do more. Even Novotny himself

evidently went to Moscow last summer to plead that Czechoslovakia's share of aid to the Arab states be cut. Indeed it appears that most of the people who count in Prague have begun to have serious doubts about the wisdom of Czechoslovakia's material support for Moscow's clients throughout the world.

14. Over the past year a new attitude in Prague toward West Germany and the Warsaw Pact has become manifest. It now appears that a majority of the Czechoslovak Party is unhappy with Moscow's attitude toward Eastern European diplomatic recognition of West Germany and that this majority favors recognition without major precondition -- a situation which distinguishes the Czechoslovaks from their Polish counterparts. The attraction toward Bonn is partly economic -- the advantages Romania has reaped are evident -- and partly political and psychological; Czechs like to remind foreign visitors these days that Prague is a hundred miles west of Vienna.

15. Czechoslovakia, a vital element in the northern tier of the Warsaw Pact, seems unlikely to duplicate Romania's defiance of the Pact at this point. But there are some interesting straws in the wind. Last September a journal of the Socialist Academy

in Prague questioned whether Soviet efforts to promote further integration within the Pact were compatible with the prerogatives of "sovereign" governments. More recently another segment of the press cited public sentiment favoring Czechoslovakia's emulation of the neutral policies of Sweden, Switzerland, and Austria. Prague Domestic Radio offered its listeners a lengthy and implicitly favorable exposition of Romania's independent policies, including its special relationship to the Warsaw Pact.

16. And there are now the little irritants in Czechoslovak-Soviet relations that Prague formerly took care to prevent. The eloquent protest by Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn against literary censorship was not read at the Soviet Writers' Congress last May, but it was read by a delegate to the Czechoslovak Writers' Congress the following month, and Solzhenitsyn himself was interviewed by Czechoslovak journalists. The principal Czech literary journal is publishing excerpts from Svetlana's book. One of the last acts of the Novotny regime was to decree, as Romania did in September 1963, that students are no longer obliged to study Russian.

17. The Soviets, for their part, are likely to see in the changes in Czechoslovakia a potential for serious trouble, either political instability in Prague or growing Czech resistance to Moscow's leadership, or both. But the Soviets will probably not move to apply heavy pressures unless or until the situation in Czechoslovakia clearly threatens their interests. The Czechs, aware of this, will probably avoid moves which might provoke the Soviets into precipitous actions. In any event, there are inhibitions on the USSR's use of crude pressures -- e.g. Moscow's concern over its own image in Western Europe -- and there are likely to be limits on the effectiveness of any political and economic levers the Soviets might seek to apply, a probability attested to by the lack of success of their efforts to arrest similar developments elsewhere, e.g. in Romania.

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Chairman